

What if we had a DROUGHT

and landscape plants didn't KNOW IT



Let's be blunt. Six in 10 years Wyoming experiences a drought. Yet, our societal norm is to fabricate a water-loving landscape out-of-place in Wyoming's dry environment. Take all the long, hot showers you want – the amount of water pales in comparison to what is supplied to personal landscapes. Fifty to 70 percent of all home water usage in towns such as Casper, Riverton, and Rock Springs goes to irrigate the landscape for the entire year – even considering the Wyoming gardening season at best is for only six months and most folks bathe at least once a day throughout the year.

Some Wyomingites are seeking change. Since 2000, Wyoming has been in severe drought, and the horticulture industry and homeowners are taking note. There is renewed interest in bringing beautiful native and adapted plant materials to market that fit Wyoming conditions. One can literally buy plants that have originated from the globe's most extreme environments – from the high elevations of Chile, China, South America, and Afghanistan, to ancient ruins of Greece. But there is another extreme environment – Wyoming and the interior Mountain West, whose outstanding native plants are making their way to market. Once established, many of these plants will not only live on our annual average precipitation of 12 inches but will thrive

on once- to twice-a-month watering during dry periods!

One of my favorites is the ornamental grass little bluestem, a native to the eastern plains of Wyoming. It will grow to be about 1 to 2 feet tall and in autumn will change in color from light greenish-blue to a brilliant reddish-orange to reddish-brown. The color will persist that way until spring, making it a standout through our long winters.

Another grass native to much of Wyoming is blue grama. This is a warm-season, short grass (6 to 12 inches tall) with wonderful seed heads that look like human eyelashes as they dance in the wind. Blue grama can be used for a low-maintenance, drought-tolerant lawn in sunny areas.

A number of penstemon varieties are native to Wyoming, and these plants with tubular shaped flowers don't like amended garden soil! Consider Bridges' penstemon and pineneedle penstemon as good

choices. Both produce brilliant red to scarlet flowers with a bloom time of early to mid-summer.

For groundcovers, consider almost all of the thymes, but a standout groundcover brought to market recently is the veronica 'Crystal Rivers.' It grows to about 18 inches wide and is about 2 inches tall. It has very dark green, thick leaves and in early summer will produce remarkably intense, tiny cobalt blue flowers.

For shrubs, consider the New Mexico privet and blue velvet honeysuckle as superior windbreak specimens that deer and rabbits rarely feast on. They both have dense



Blue velvet honeysuckle

canopies from head to toe and will provide protection from Wyoming's winds.

For trees, consider the newly introduced 'Hot Wings' tartarian maple (*Acer tataricum* 'GarAnn'). Its origins are the Asian Steppe. In early summer, the "helicopter" seeds of this maple turn a brilliant hot pink to red against the dark green leaves – imagine a Christmas tree in June! In autumn, expect brilliant red to orange fall colors as the leaves turn.

There are literally hundreds more plants to choose from that will handle dramatically reduced water requirements!

How does one find out about these plants?

Consider these options as starters for excellent reference books on the subject of plants and their landscape (water) requirements:

Xeriscape Plant Guide: 100 Water-Wise Plants for Gardens and Landscapes developed by Denver Water and the American Water Works Association, Fulcrum Publishing ISBN 1-55591-322-9

Water Wise: Native Plants for Intermountain Landscapes, 2003, Wendy Mee et. al, Utah State University Press. ISBN 0-87421-561-7

Next, Web search "xeriscape plants for the Rocky Mountain region." A plethora of individual fact sheets on a vast array of plants from groundcovers, perennial flowers, grasses, and trees and shrubs that fit our conditions are available.

An excellent Web site is www.plantselect.org. Plant Select® is a cooperative research project between the Denver Botanic Gardens, Colorado State University, and the



western horticulture industry. Its mission is to research the "very best" plants suitable to the Rocky Mountain region. After intensive research from many locations across the West, the research is compiled and those plants that have done the best are given a Plant Select label.

The Web site provides plant information on how best to grow these gems.

Lastly, consider local experts. Many nursery personnel are very fond of low-water plants and can give great information and guidance. They are often in the know of other gardeners who have followed xeric footsteps. UW CES at http://ces.uwyo.edu/PUBS/Horticulture/Horticulture_Publications_Main.htm has several horticulture bulletins that focus on trees, shrubs, flowers, grasses, and other subjects for Wyoming. They include *Landscaping: Water-Wise Wyoming Gardens*, B-1143, and *WyoScape: Landscaping for the Wyoming Climate*, B-1139.

Most gardeners are delighted to show off their gardens, so take advantage of this to check out what will grow well in your area. With a little bit of persistence, your efforts will be rewarded!



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